

A Remark on Brandom's 'New' Meaning-Use Analysis

Robert Brandom (2008) proposes in his Locke lectures a new tool for analysing language: the meaning-use analysis. A meaning-use analysis determines which practices or abilities (henceforth taken as an unanalysed package) have to be exercised in order to deploy a specific vocabulary. On this conception, practices-or-abilities can be necessary or sufficient for each other. The practices-or-abilities exercised in counting, for example, can be seen as necessary (or even sufficient) for adding, subtracting and a variety of other basic mathematical operations. Furthermore, practices-or-abilities can be necessary or sufficient for specific vocabularies. The example here could, again, be the practices-or-abilities in counting, because they can be seen to be at least necessary for deploying vocabularies with cardinal and ordinal numbers.

In his *Between Saying & Doing* (2008), Brandom applies the meaning-use analysis to explain the basic elements of language use and claims that the practices-or-abilities exercised in asserting are necessary for inferring and vice versa (2008: 42-3). He also notes that he had made a much stronger (and more controversial) claim in *Making It Explicit* (1994), namely that asserting is necessary and sufficient for inferring and vice versa (cf. (1994: 159) for one version of the stronger claim). That there is a difference between the two versions of meaning-use analysis is apparent, but it might still be useful to state clearly what a substantial difference in this case consists in: two meaning-use analyses differ substantially only if they are based on different claims about whether certain practices-or-abilities are necessary or sufficient for some other practices-or-abilities. Therefore, *Between Saying & Doing* (*BSD*) and *Making It Explicit* (*MIE*) feature substantially different meaning-use analyses. But is this conclusion as cogent as it seems? Arguably not.

Consider that asserting is necessary for inferring and vice versa only if logical vocabulary can explain (at least some) necessary properties of the practices-or-abilities exercised in inferring. Furthermore, asserting is necessary and sufficient for inferring and vice versa only if logical vocabulary can sufficiently explain the necessary properties of the practices-or-abilities exercised in inferring. Now, according to *MIE*, logical vocabulary can sufficiently explain the necessary properties—a claim that lies at the very heart of the book (cf. (1994: xx)). In *BSD*, Brandom makes essentially the same claim, because he argues that vocabulary containing the conditional is sufficient for explaining the necessary properties of the practices-or-abilities exercised in inferring (2008: 46-7). He makes similar claims about vocabularies containing the negation (47-8), modal vocabulary (102-3), and normative vocabulary (111); the idea is that they play similar roles in explaining language-use in general (or 'autonomous discursive practice', as he calls it). But then it seems true for both accounts, the one in *MIE* and the one in *BSD*, that asserting is necessary and sufficient for inferring, simply because of the way he introduces logical vocabulary and its explanatory force. This contradicts the conclusion concerning the relation of the projects in *BSD* and in *MIE* which was introduced above.

The upshot is that *BSD* either forwards, pace Brandom's allegation, no new form of meaning-use analysis or is incoherent. Alternatively, one may claim that asserting is only necessary for inferring (and vice versa) and that, hence, the use of logical vocabulary can, at best, only explain some necessary properties of the practices-or-abilities exercised in inferring. But then, the meaning-use analysis cannot explain as much as Brandom claims.

Rejecting the latter claim must involve claiming that, possibly, a competent language user could draw all sorts of inferences without ever basing any assertion on them or use only premises which have never been asserted. It is difficult to see what would make such a claim true, but it should be clear that this alternative entails no concessions to Brandom's meaning-use analysis.

References

- Brandom, Robert 2008. *Between Saying & Doing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Brandom, Robert 1994. *Making It Explicit*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.